# FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
# September 2, 2001

# STRANGERS
# John M. Buchanan

**God persistently challenges conventional truth and regularly upsets the world's way of looking at things. It is no accident that this God is so often represented by the stranger, for the truth that God speaks in our lives is strange indeed. Where the world sees impossibility, God sees potential. Where the world sees comfort, God sees idolatry. Where the world sees insecurity, God sees occasions for faith. Where the world sees death, God proclaims life. God uses the stranger to shake us from our conventional points of view. God *is* a stranger to us, and it is at the risk of missing God's truth that we domesticate God, reduce God to the role of familiar friend.**

**Parker J. Palmer**
**The Company of Strangers**

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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**STRANGERS**
**September 2, 2001**

**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Scripture**
**Luke 14:1,7-14**
**Hebrews 13:1-3**

**"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."**

***Dear God, among your gifts to us – is the ability to work and create and produce and contribute to the common good. We thank you for your work today. And we thank you for a long weekend without work: for this time together in which we mean to honor you. Bless this time and warm our hearts with your love, that we will find ourselves loving others – even strangers among our midst: in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.***

**Last week the City of Chicago and the Chicago Public Library system launched a creative new program – "One Book – One Chicago." The idea is to persuade as many Chicagoans as possible to read a book, the same book, at the same time. The purpose is to encourage the reading of good literature, but also to strengthen the bonds of citizenship by encouraging people to read, and think, and then talk together about important ideas.**

**The book the library and the Mayor chose for us to read is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. It was published in 1961 and many of us read it then. It won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961 and was made into a highly acclaimed motion picture in 1962 starring Gregory Peck who won the Oscar for Best Actor for his portrayal of Atticus, a widowed attorney and father of a little boy, Jem, and a little girl, Scout.**

**It is about a rural Alabama town in the 1930's, and the trial of Tom Robinson, an African American accused of raping a white woman. Atticus Finch accepts the responsibility and challenge of defending Tom Robinson, not a popular thing to do in Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930's.**

**But it is also about Atticus' relationship with his son and daughter, and it is about human dignity, integrity, courage, grace and hospitality.**

**Wanting to be a good citizen of Chicago, I found my old copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* – and within the first thirty pages encountered a remarkable story. It is the first week of school for Scout Finch. Her first grade teacher is Miss Caroline, who is also new. At lunch time, Miss Caroline surveys the lunch boxes and tins her students have brought, notices that one little boy, Walter Cunningham, has none and offers to lend him 25 cents to buy his lunch. Walter refuses, Miss Caroline doesn't understand, so Scout stands up and explains that Walter doesn't have a lunch because he's a Cunningham and the Cunningham's are so**

**poor they can't afford lunch and couldn't afford to pay back the 25 cents. It's a difficult moment and later, at the lunch break, Jem, Scout's brother, invites Walter to come home with the two of them for his lunch.**

**Calpurnia, the beloved house keeper and cook sets another place, the children – and Atticus sit down to eat, Walter asks if there was any molasses in the house. Calpurnia brings the syrup pitcher and Walter pours molasses on his vegetables and meat. Scout remembers, "and would probably have poured it into his milk glass had I not asked him what the samhill he was doing."**

**"Atticus shook his head at me again. 'But he's gone and drowned his dinner in syrup' I protested. 'He's poured it all over …'"**

**"It was then that Calpurnia requested my presence in the kitchen. She was furious … she squinted down at me 'There's some folks who don't eat like us,' she whispered fiercely, 'but you ain't called on to contradict 'em at the table when they don't. That's boy's yo' company and if he wants to eat up the table cloth, you let him, you hear?' 'He ain't company, Cal, he's a Cunningham' 'Hush your mouth! Don't matter who they are, anybody sets foot in this house 's yo' company, and don't you let me catch you remarkin' on their ways like you was so high and mighty! Yo folks might be better 'n the Cunninghams but it don't count for nothin' the way your disgracin' 'em – if you can't act fit to eat at the table you can just sit here and eat in the kitchen.' [page 30-31]**

**And then I turned to the Lectionary readings for the first Sunday in September and I found the words of Jesus: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted" – and – I found words written to the earliest Christian Church a few decades after Jesus – found in the Epistle of the Hebrews: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."**

**It is, in fact, a very important Biblical theme. Faith in Jesus Christ is reflected in hospitality – the life which has been redeemed and re-formed by the love of Christ will be characterized by openness and generosity – and hospitality – the exact translation of which is "the love of strangers."**

**The Epistle to the Hebrews reference – that in showing hospitality to strangers some have entertained angels without knowing it – refers to one of our oldest stories, in the 18th chapter of Genesis. The late Dale Evans wrote a book with the title – <u>Angel Unaware</u> – about her experience parenting a Down syndrome child. In the Genesis story, three strangers visit Abraham and Sarah – who receive them graciously, bring water to wash their feet, extend typical Mid-Eastern hospitality: slaughter a calf, bake cakes, bring drinks. And it turns out that the three really are on a mission from God: they are there to tell Sarah that she's going to conceive in her old age and have a child – Sarah laughs at the absurdity of their suggestion – but does have a son, Issac, whose name is "Laughter." So the men were angels, messengers from God, and if Abraham and Sarah had not extended hospitality the news never would have gotten through.**

**It is one of many biblical incidents in which God makes an appearance in an unlikely, unexpected way and in which individuals either miss or nearly miss a revelation of God because they cannot be open to something new and strange and different.**

**"Let mutual love continue", the writer letter admonished the early church. Let love among you be genuine and powerful and real. But – don't forget the stranger – don't forget to be hospitable and the sense of it is that sometimes people in the church can enjoy loving one another so much that they become an intimate, and closed, company and an outsider doesn't feel welcome at all, in fact can't figure out how to break in. It's endemic in churches. We love each other so much and it is so good to see one another and we can't wait to get caught up on this and that, that a stranger finds it very difficult and awkward and after standing alone, balancing a cup and saucer at the coffee hour, looking at the walls and ceiling and floor, finds the exit and quietly walks out.**

**But it's more serious than that even. In the story Luke tells about Jesus, a Pharisee has invited a group of friends to a dinner party. Jesus is there as one of the guests. Now, people then, and now, are invited to dinner because the host likes them, or is interested in them, or is related to them, or wishes to establish a reciprocal relationship. Dinner parties are pleasant affairs. It's nice to be invited to one. It's nice to feel wanted, and the food is usually good and the conversation interesting. But not this dinner party the way Luke recalls it. As soon as the guests are seated, or, in this case, reclining around the low table, Jesus criticizes the other guests for the way they had jockeyed and scrambled to get the best seats at the head of the table. "Sit at the lowest place" he said – "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." That must have made everybody uncomfortable.**

**But there's more. He scolded the host, criticizing him for his choice of guests. One New Testament scholar, commenting on this passage said, "I'm certainly glad I wasn't at that dinner party." "Don't invite these kind of people", he said. Friends, relatives, business associates – people who will, in all probability agree to the conventional social custom and in some way return your invitation. Instead invite poor people, crippled people, blind people: the people – and here's the point – who live on the far side of a very substantial social boundary, people excluded by you and people like you, social nobodies, religious sinners, the unclean, the one's nobody wants to spend any time with, the strangers.**

**Jesus proposes that his host cross a very important social, political, and religious boundary – in a way not unlike Atticus Finch's agreeing to defend a poor African American man in Alabama in the 1930's and Calpurnia's hospitality extended to a poor little boy who pours molasses on his mashed potatoes.**

**Jesus proposes a human community based on something other than social custom, economic reciprocity and intellectual affinity. Jesus proposes a human community based on nothing but the fact that God is its creator – and therefore each person is a precious child of God. That challenged his own people, and it continues to challenge us – as citizens, as a Christian church, and as individual Christians.**

**Quaker Theologian Parker Palmer has written a good book *The Company of Strangers* in which he suggests that modern life cultivates a suspicion of strangers, people who are different. In fact, he points out, we have organized life carefully so that we spend much of our time in private and rarely if ever have to confront the other, the different, the stranger. We live, eat, work, travel, shop and engage in leisure time activities with people like ourselves. We worship, mostly, with people who look and live like us. And all the while we regard the stranger as sinister, threatening, dangerous. One of the differences between life in a small town and life in a big city is that small town people are inclined to smile and greet one another – even strangers. Urbanites are much more careful: a smile and greeting from a total stranger on Michigan Avenue is regarded with suspicion, "what does this guy want?"**

**In a end essay in *Time* magazine recently on how to negotiate the trauma of saying goodbye to your college freshman, Bruce Cameron quips: It's an odd sensation: for 18 years you've been telling your child not to talk to strangers, and now she is going to live with them." [*Time*, July 22, 2001]**

**Not without reason most of us were taught and have taught our children to be, at least wary, careful, about strangers. But when that common sense advice becomes an operating, organizing principle for life we have moved from prudence to social sin, according to Jesus. Parker Palmer comments on how our suspicion of strangers causes us to avoid certain places, neighborhoods – "When we begin to think of space as unsafe," he says, "We withdraw from it, and as we withdraw from it, it becomes unsafe. Space is kept safe and secure, not primarily by good lighting and police power, but by the presence of a healthy public life." [p.48] And, I thought about how for decades this city literally withdrew from its own enclaves of public housing, economically, educationally, socially, leaving this city with a half century of social disintegration and dysfunction. For the life of me I've never been able to understand how we can afford a floral bonanza, changed seasonally, on Michigan Avenue, and can't figure out how to pick up a little bit of trash on Division Street.**

**It is getting much better and the recent economic revival at Cabrini Green, with new businesses, new schools, new housing, is welcome. And it is important that we are there – this big urban, Michigan Avenue Church, with a Center for Whole Life at Cabrini Green – whose purpose is, simply, to express the hospitality of Jesus Christ to our brothers and sisters – who are persistently marginalized, strangers.**

**Sometimes I think that the church has it all wrong: that perhaps our fundamental purpose is simply to live in the world in a way that shows the hospitality of Jesus. Sometimes I think we get it all wrong when we spend all our energies arguing about morality, or theological orthodoxy, convulsing the church with our sinful certainty that we know the whole truth and the right moral position and people who disagree are immoral heretics, forgetting, in the process, Jesus' clear instructions to people who want to be associated with him about loving the unlovely, including the excluded, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, befriending the lonely, showing hospitality to strangers.**

**Sometimes I wish simply that churches – including my own, would shut up and listen to what Jesus said, and then – in an eloquent and dramatic and faithful act – open their doors, wide open – wherever they are – and put out a sign which says – "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are welcome here, whoever you are, you are all welcome here." Can you imagine that – churches no longer locked up tight as drums, safe and secure and protected from unwelcome strangers – but with doors wide open? Can you imagine if Christian Churches, in the name of Jesus, simply and eloquently said: "come in – you are welcome. We, and this building we have built and maintained and love so much is not ours at all. It's for you. It's what Jesus meant – what Jesus was and is." Oh, I know, I know. The Property Committee will never go for it. The Trustees are already getting nervous. People would trash the place, get mud on the carpets and carve their initials on the pews. But, I propose modestly, that the cost is worth it; in fact, I'm pretty certain Jesus would patiently explain that showing his love is never cheap.**

**We do it here and have for years. Our front door is open – 9 to 5 every day and people do come, hundreds come – thousands yearly. People come to sit quietly, and rest, and pray, and think. Some weep. Some take a nap and yes, on occasion homeless people stretch out and sleep in the pews. Occasionally, a couple walks in, sits down, and the man pulls a ring out of his pocket and puts it on her finger and asks her to marry him. And yes, on occasion – not very often actually, coffee is spilled, or food is ground into the floor and on one occasion in 15 years someone painted a message on the wall and it took some money to clean it up, and once a gentlemen walked up to the chancel in the middle of the day and took all his clothes off and the house staff brought a blanket and covered him and helped him down to the Social Service Center. That story will live forever around here. And many, many days, the legendary street artist Lee Godie, sat all day in our pews and used us, in every way, as her home – because ours was the only building in which she felt safe and comfortable – and welcome. Lee was a good artist but she was pretty dirty and didn't smell nice.**

**So wouldn't it be something if the whole church of Jesus Christ – little churches, big churches, country churches and city churches and county seat churches and neighborhood churches – had a moment of revelation, a conversion, and opened their doors and accepted the risks and responsibilities of love?**

**What would they get? What would you and I get if we, individually, began to take seriously Jesus' admonition? Well, the churches – and you and I, personally, would probably get some trouble, some inconvenience, and expense. We wouldn't get a reciprocal invitation to dinner, that's for sure. What we would get, I believe – is nothing more or less than a sense that we are doing what Jesus wants us to do, and we just might also get some interest in who we are trying to be, and whose name we are using – the Jesus who asks us to be like this.**

**Once a week, at least, I receive a letter thanking us – all of us – for our hospitality. Last week's letter came from Gaynell Jefferies who lives in Stephenville, Texas. She was in Chicago with her daughter to attend a convention. She wrote, "While we were shopping on Michigan Avenue we saw your beautiful church and that it was open for prayer. What a wonderful blessing in the middle of confusion to be able to stop for a few minutes in prayer. Thank you so much for the opportunity."**

**So what we get is gratitude and friendship and maybe a sense that someone knows something new about Jesus and his people, but there are no guarantees.**

**What you and I get – is right there in the promise. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."**

**So what you get is the pleasure and blessing of God – and always the possibility that the other, the stranger, is an angel, and that, it seems to me makes the risks involved very much worth taking.**

**Amen.**